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TAGS: [IS KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT](#)
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

- [1](#)1. Mideast
- [1](#)2. U.S.-Israel Relations

Key stories in the media:

All media led with the release Sunday of Azzam Azzam, the Israeli Druze who was convicted of espionage in Egypt, where he was spent eight years in jail. He was exchanged for six Egyptian students who were captured in August on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks in southern Israel. Ha'aretz reported that Israel also stated that it is considering the release of dozens of Palestinian prisoners who do not have "blood on their hands." Ha'aretz quoted PM Sharon as saying Sunday that Egypt believes in the seriousness of his disengagement plan and wants to contribute to it. The newspaper quoted Foreign Ministry sources as saying that Egypt would probably appoint an ambassador to Israel after the elections in the PA on January 9. This morning, Israel Radio quoted FM Silvan Shalom as saying that over the past Israel has successfully been coordinating its disengagement plan with Egypt. Several media reported that right-wing groups questioned how it is possible that Israel can negotiate and swap prisoners with Egypt but not with its closest ally, the U.S. -- referring to Jonathan Pollard.

Israel Radio cited London's Daily Telegraph as saying that late this month or early next month, a conference of Middle Eastern leaders, probably at foreign-minister level, will convene in London. The Daily Telegraph quoted an Israeli source as saying that, should Marwan Barghouti be elected PA chairman, the conference would not take place. Israel Radio reported that efforts are going on within Fatah to convince Barghouti to renounce his candidacy.

On Sunday, Jerusalem Post reported that Palestinian PM Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala) on Saturday accused Israel of escalating tensions by pursuing its policy of targeted killings and settlement construction.

Ha'aretz quoted Knesset Member Omri Sharon, the PM's son, as saying that a "broad-based government" with the Labor Party will not be a "national-unity government of equals." The newspaper says that his remark is directed at the members of the Likud Convention, which will Thursday debate the Labor Party's entry into the government.

On Sunday, Jerusalem Post quoted Efraim Inbar, Director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University as saying: "We [Israel] don't have to open negotiations with Syria since the Americans aren't interested in this track. The Americans don't want us to smile at [Damascus]." Israel Radio reported that co-initiator of the Peoples' Voice peace initiative and former Shin Bet head Ami Ayalon joined the Labor Party today. Maariv reported that Ayalon associates have suggested he vie for a ministerial portfolio.

All media reported on the visit of the three most senior PA leaders to Damascus, scheduled for today, which Ha'aretz views as "historical, possibly signaling the change underway in the Middle East since the death of Yasser Arafat last month." Ha'aretz quoted PLO head Mahmoud Abbas as saying that the PA will negotiate a hudna (truce) with the Hamas leadership in the West

Bank, rather with than the organization's leaders overseas. Senior Palestinian security official Jibril Rajoub, who is visiting Egypt, told Israel Radio this morning that Israel is prepared to advance disengagement in coordination with the PA. On Sunday, leading media quoted senior Hamas member in the West Bank Hassan Yousef as saying over the weekend that he is prepared to establish a long-term hudna in exchange for Palestinian statehood. On Sunday, Maariv wrote that the relatively moderate statements emanating recently from the territories reveal the beginnings of a crack in the Hamas's leadership, as it appears that, for the first time in a long period, the local leadership of Hamas does not see eye-to-eye with the expatriate leadership based in Damascus. On Sunday, leading media reported that Abd a-Natif Muhammad Tayeh, the leader of Hamas in Tulkarm, was arrested during the weekend.

Jerusalem Post quoted Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz as saying at Sunday's cabinet meeting that the number of attempted terrorist attacks has dropped since Yasser Arafat died three weeks ago, with Palestinian terror groups in "waiting mode" to see how things develop on the ground. Maariv reported that following Arafat's demise and the possibility that Abbas could be elected PA chairman, Israel could reconsider its decision to physically dismantle the settlements it intends to evacuate in the Gaza Strip and the northernmost part of the West Bank. On Sunday, Maariv quoted Labor Party Chairman Shimon Peres as saying that Israel must disengage from all the territories.

On Sunday, Ha'aretz reported that Iran and Hizbullah have intensified their efforts to operate in the territories in order to prevent a cease-fire.

On Sunday, leading media reported that Syria has asked the international community to pressure Israel to agree to talks without preconditions. Jerusalem Post quoted O/C Chaplaincy Corps Brig. Gen. Yisrael Weiss as saying Sunday he has received a series of threatening letters from anti-disengagement activists. Leading media also reported that three right-wing extremists were arrested Sunday for allegedly stoning the home of Rabbi Menahem Froman -- known for holding talks with Arafat and Hamas leaders -- in the West Bank settlement of Tekoa.

Maariv reported that the Likud's Moshe Kahlon, who is of Libyan origin, could soon visit Libya, thus becoming the first Knesset member ever to meet with Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi. The newspaper also writes that in two weeks senior representatives of the Libyan government will attend a world conference of Jews of Libyan origin in Rome. Maariv also reported that Sunday a senior member of Tunisia's Parliament, who is a close associate of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, contacted Likud MK Majalli Whbee, telling him that Israel-Tunisia links are expected to warm up soon.

Leading media quoted Industry, Trade and Labor Ehud Olmert as saying Sunday that Israel, Egypt, and the U.S. are set to sign a free trade area agreement next week, similar to the qualified industrial zone (QIZ) Israel shares with Jordan.

On Sunday, leading media reported that over the weekend the U.S. Administration has finally approved the sale of 50 sophisticated air-to-air missiles to Jordan.

Leading media quoted nuclear whistleblower Mordecai Vanunu as saying, in an interview with the British Sky News TV Sunday, that Israel's nuclear weapons are pushing other countries in the Middle East to develop similar arms.

On Sunday, Ha'aretz reported that the police have reopened an investigation into a deal between the Hachsharat Hayishuv company, controlled by the Nimrodi family, and the Sycamore Ranch, owned by Sharon's sons. The company may have illegally given 1.3 million shekels (about USD 300,000) to the Sharon family.

1. Mideast:

Summary:

Independent, left leaning Ha'aretz editorialized:
"Egyptian obstinacy in the Azzam case has now been replaced by a gesture that must be understood within the political context: in the last few days there has been a significant improvement in the personal and

public ties between Egypt and Israel." Liberal op-ed writer Ofer Shelach opined in the editorial of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "Now, after Arafat's death and thanks to Egyptian interests, an escape hatch has been found for Sharon."

Arab affairs correspondent Jackie Hoogie wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv: "The freedom of Azzam Azzam is the blessing that Mubarak is giving to Sharon and himself in the light of the new chapter that has been started."

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: "Cairo has hitherto apparently failed to absorb the win-win nature of true normalization. Let's hope the overdue release of Azzam Azzam is an early indicator that Egypt is finally getting the message."

Nationalist, Orthodox Hatzofe editorialized: "[Mubarak] continues to produce strategic weapons in other domains."

Block Quotes:

I. "Foundations of the New Hope"

Independent, left leaning Ha'aretz editorialized (December 6): "The news of Azzam Azzam's release from prison in Egypt contains both joy and hope. Joy that an Israeli citizen -- who was sentenced by an Egyptian military tribunal to 15 years in prison after being convicted on dubious charges -- was released after serving a little more than half his sentence.... It is also joy over the success of tireless diplomatic efforts initiated by Israel together with the United States. Azzam's arrest and trial became, in time, a symbol of the cool relations between Egypt and Israel.... Egyptian obstinacy in the Azzam case has now been replaced by a gesture that must be understood within the political context: in the last few days there has been a significant improvement in the personal and public ties between Egypt and Israel.... These developments did not begin with Azzam's release. They have been going on for several months, and for the Israeli public they culminated on Sunday. Once again there is hope that what was seen Sunday as a rare expression of friendship will soon become the norm. Sharon's disengagement plan, the new voices among the Palestinians, even among radical groups like Hamas, and especially Egypt's willingness and desire to change the political reality in the region, are the foundations of the new hope."

II. "We Didn't Abandon Him for a Moment"

Liberal op-ed writer Ofer Shelach opined in the editorial of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (December 6): "Sharon marketed disengagement to a people bleeding and in pain, which didn't want to hear about a partner. He thus managed to turn an initiative which most of the military and political establishment opposed into a popular public initiative and was supported by a majority in the Knesset. But on the ground, unilateral disengagement is liable to be disastrous.... And now, after Arafat's death and thanks to Egyptian interests, an escape hatch has been found for Sharon. Under Egyptian sponsorship, the Palestinians will be able to reach an agreement among themselves, an agreement that Israel will profess not to take into account, but in practice, will cooperate with. The Egyptians will help the Palestinians take responsibility and will provide a cover for controversial security moves, such as leaving Philadelphia Road. They will be the responsible adult behind which hides the partner, in a way that allows all the sides to pretend that they are only talking to themselves. From moment to moment, from step to step, the sides are approaching the moment of truth. At that moment they will have no choice but to relinquish their convenient narratives, behind which they have barricaded themselves for the last four years. They will again have to recognize their common interests, despite the hatred and the blood, and even admit responsibility, each on his own side, for some of the bloodshed. Will this indeed happen? It's difficult to know. But Azzam Azzam's return home, a joyful human occasion, is another step in this greater move, and the final step has yet to be taken."

III. "Hoping For More"

Arab affairs correspondent Jackie Hoogie wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv (December 6): "In contrast to Netanyahu, with whom he had exchanged childish taunts, or Barak, who did not know how to appease [events on] the ground, Sharon has displayed to the Egyptian

President the wisdom of tribal elders. He is engaged in actions, speaks little, and reaps the rewards -- the elimination of Hamas, the destruction of the tunnels, the suppression of the Intifada. Mubarak is also fed up with this whole war.... Since [Arafat] passed on, there has been no one to give friendly support to Hamas or disturb the disengagement process. In the absence of Arafat, there is no one to punish Sharon for the boycott he imposed upon him by dispatching cells from Gaza after the withdrawal. Neither is there anyone to stand firm against the security rehabilitation plan of the Gaza Strip conceived by Egyptian Intelligence Minister Omar Suleiman. Here is an opportunity to establish a Palestinian state, said Osama Sariyeh, a senior Egyptian journalist yesterday. It needs the propulsion of processes, and Azzam Azzam is one of them.... The freedom of Azzam Azzam is the blessing that Mubarak is giving to Sharon and himself in the light of the new chapter that has been started. It is a humble gift that was frozen for eight years, only in order to be pulled out for exactly these purposes. The Egyptian hope is that the gift will leave the desire for more here."

IV. "A First Step"

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (December 6): "While Mubarak's praise for Sharon is gratifying, the president has yet to consent to the simple, face-to-face contact with our prime minister that is the foundation of good relations.... Progress here is crucial if Egypt -- which has played a spoiling role at crucial moments of Israeli-Palestinian contact, like the July 2000 Camp David talks -- wants to be perceived as a constructive force toward Arab acceptance of, and genuine reconciliation with, Israel. Were Egypt now to truly press for such a goal, it would not only benefit Israel. And it would not only echo positively with a U.S. government that provides Egypt with vast financial aid. It would also, self-evidently, benefit Egypt itself -- not least in its own fight against Islamic extremism. None of this should need saying, yet Cairo has hitherto apparently failed to absorb the win-win nature of true normalization. Let's hope the overdue release of Azzam Azzam is an early indicator that Egypt is finally getting the message."

V. "Don't Be Blinded"

Nationalist, Orthodox Hatzofe editorialized (December 6): "Hosni Mubarak felt that there was growing criticism of Egypt in Israel. He decided to throw some 'small change' and to calm the waters. Indeed, the words worked, but he continues to produce strategic weapons in other domains. Mubarak is interested in an Israel-Syria agreement that would most certainly bring about a significant pullout from the Golan. Arab states will provide words, whereas Israel will give territories, bringing it to the 'Auschwitz borders.' [reference to the 1967 borders]"

12. U.S.-Israel Relations:

Summary:

German Ambassador to Israel Rudolph Dressler wrote in independent, left leaning Ha'aretz: "Israel must decide -- economic relations [with the EU] only or also a renewed political approach? Israel will not be spared a debate over partially freeing itself from the United States."

Block Quotes:

"A German National Interest"

German Ambassador to Israel Rudolph Dressler wrote in independent, left leaning Ha'aretz (December 5): "Nearly 60 years after the demise of Nazi Germany and almost 40 years since diplomatic relations were established between Israel and the second German republic -- in May 1965 -- the German Embassy in Tel Aviv operates in a unique environment for German diplomacy. Germany is today seen in the eyes of many Israeli leaders as the second most important partner after the United States in the fields of politics, economics, research and technology.... We are the second most important partner in Israel's foreign trade.... The enlargement of the European Union to 25 countries is a historic event. The single currency,

the euro, is something akin to a miracle. The economic power this generates is still unfathomed. The inherent possibilities have only been partly elaborated -- more people than in the U.S., greater purchasing power than in the U.S., more economic strength. These facts and possibilities are now at Israel's doorstep. This also has political significance: whether one likes it or not, Europe is destined to play a more important role in the Middle East. And herein lies the implication: Israel must decide -- economic relations only or also a renewed political approach? Israel will not be spared a debate over partially freeing itself from the United States.... My country wants to assist Israel. This assistance relates to the principle we defined during the visit of the president of the State of Israel in Berlin last spring: ensuring the existence of Israel is a German national interest and is thus one of the centerpieces of our political thinking."

CRETZ